

HED: One Great Food: Sweet Potatoes

DEK: Chef **Michel Nischan** finds his greatest inspiration in his own backyard. Here, he shares his philosophy and his recipes for spring's richest root vegetable.

By Michel Nischan, author of *Homegrown Pure and Simple: Great Healthy Food from the Garden to the Table* (Chronicle Books, 2005)

My mother is my greatest inspiration for creating healthy, delicious meals. A devotee of down-home southern cooking, she spread our family table with indulgences: smothered pork chops, buttermilk biscuits, fried chicken and angel food cake. She also grew as many vegetables as she could in the backyard, and anything she couldn't grow she bought at farm stands around our home in suburban Illinois. We harvested fresh vegetables in late spring, summer and fall; in winter and early spring, we ate the canned, preserved and frozen vegetables and fruits mom had put up in the fall.

When I worked on a guide **ENDORSED BY** the Association of Diabetes Educators in **2000**, I submitted a recipe for pork chops based on my mother's recipe. Accompanied by plenty of fresh vegetables, each serving was smaller than in most contemporary recipes, so the recipe met the dietary requirements to be featured in the book.

My mom's rule was "one pork chop per person." She wanted us to sample everything else: whole roasted cauliflower, collard greens, beans, home-canned tomatoes and rice. We begged for a second chop, but in the end, those mighty tasty vegetables appeased our appetites.

Today, my philosophy is to share simple, down-to-earth recipes that rely on the bounty of gardens and local farms. Fresh, locally grown produce has the most nutrients and the best flavor. Eating this way also connects us to our food far better than eating in a fast food restaurant.

Sweet potatoes, a personal favorite, are the under-celebrated star of the nutritious food world. One small sweet potato contains over 200 percent of our daily vitamin-A requirements, and an average of 20 percent of our daily vitamin C, manganese, copper, dietary fiber, potassium and iron. Recent animal studies have shown that sweet potato consumption actually stabilizes blood sugar and reduces insulin resistance, likely due to their abundance of the root storage protein *glutathione*. I've come to love and appreciate this humble root, especially because I have two sons with diabetes. When the potatoes are ready to be harvested in March and April, my children help dig them up in our garden. It's like a treasure hunt!

Coriander Salmon with Sweet Potato Sauce

(serves 4)

I use sweet potatoes in this recipe to create a rich, 'decadent' sauce without butter or cream. The wilted greens provide an arsenal of essential vitamins and other nutrients along with soluble fiber. Oh, and did I mention it's delicious?

Sweet Potato Sauce:

1 1/2 cups sweet potato juice (about 1 to 2 potatoes)

Note: To juice sweet potatoes, run them under cold running water, scrub them lightly with a coarse pad or brush (there's no need to peel), then place in a juicer. If you don't have a juicer, you can purchase fresh juice from your local health food store or juice stand.

1 tablespoon sliced fresh ginger

1/2 Thai chili, seeded and minced

1 tablespoon freshly sliced cilantro leaves

Fresh lemon juice, coarse salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

4 skinless boneless salmon filets, 6 ounces each

1/4 cup coriander seeds **TWO TABLESPOONS**

2 tablespoons grapeseed or olive oil

8 cups chopped kale

Salt and pepper to taste

1 small clove garlic, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons water

Let the sweet potato juice stand for 30 to 60 minutes at room temperature to allow some of the starch to settle. Pour the juice into a wide, shallow saucepan, being careful to leave the settled starch behind. Bring to a gentle boil over medium heat. Reduce the heat and simmer for 15 to 25 minutes, or until reduced to about 1 cup. When the juice first boils, it will look as if it's curdled, but it will bring itself together. Remove from the heat and stir in the ginger, chili and cilantro. Stir to taste (the sauce will absorb more of the spice the

longer it sits), then strain immediately through a fine-mesh sieve. Season to taste with lemon juice, salt and pepper. Set aside and keep warm.

Cook the coriander seeds in a medium sauté pan over medium heat, tossing or stirring constantly, until they begin to smell like toasted oranges. Remove from the heat and grind coarsely in a coffee grinder or place in a folded kitchen towel and pound with a meat mallet. If you're short on time, you can buy ground coriander; it's not too much of a flavor sacrifice.

Season the salmon filets with salt and pepper, then press one side in the ground coriander seeds. Pre-heat a medium pan over medium heat. Lightly pat the salmon filets with one tablespoon of grapeseed oil on the side pressed in coriander and place the oiled side down in the hot pan. Cook about 4 to 5 minutes or until well browned.

Turn the filets over and cook another four to five minutes. Remove from the pan and keep warm. Drizzle the remaining oil into the salmon pan and add the sliced garlic **[how much garlic? It's not listed in the ingredients]**. Sauté until the garlic is lightly browned, and then add the kale and water **[how much water?]**. Turn the heat to high and sauté until the water is evaporated and the kale is shrunken and wilted--about 5 minutes. Place a mound of kale into the center of each of four warmed plates. Rest a salmon filet atop each and drizzle with the sweet potato sauce.

Cinnamon-Roasted Sweet Potatoes

(serves 6)

As much as I like traditional preparations made with sweet potatoes, they often include butter, brown sugar, maple syrup--even marshmallows! Sweet potatoes are sweet

enough, so it's really not necessary to add sugar. Roasting them is easy and accentuates the flavor of the root.

2 tablespoons honey

2 tablespoons grapeseed or canola oil

6 sweet potatoes, unpeeled, halved lengthwise

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

6 cinnamon sticks

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Whisk together the honey and oil in a small bowl, rub the potato halves with the mixture, then season with salt and pepper. Arrange, skin side down, in a shallow baking dish and bake for about 20 minutes, or until the potatoes begin to soften.

Remove the pan from the oven and turn the sweet potatoes skin side up. Tuck the cinnamon sticks under the potatoes. Roast 20 to 30 minutes longer, or until the potatoes are cooked through and the cinnamon sticks are lightly browned.

Serve the sweet potatoes on a round platter with the browned cinnamon sticks bunched together and standing upright in the center.

Sweet Potato Breakfast Bread

(makes 1 loaf; serves 10 to 12)

This sweet morning bread is made with the sweet potato pulp left from juicing. You also can use other vegetable pulps, such as white potato and winter squash, in your own quick-bread and muffin recipes.

Flavorless vegetable oil spray and spelt flour for preparing pan

2 cinnamon sticks

1 cup freshly pressed apple juice or apple cider

1 star anise pod

1 cup sweet potato pulp (from 1 1/2 pounds sweet potatoes)

1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

1 1/2 cups spelt flour

1 1/4 teaspoons baking soda

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup honey

1/4 cup organic plain whole-milk yogurt

1/4 cup soft fresh goat cheese

1 large egg

2 tablespoons olive oil

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly spray a 9" x 5" loaf pan with flavorless vegetable oil.

Dust it lightly with spelt flour.

Holding them with tongs, toast the cinnamon sticks an inch or so above a high gas flame for about 1 minute, or until they darken a shade and are fragrant. You can also set

them directly on a hot electric coil and turn them as they toast. This takes 20 to 30 seconds. With either method, be sure to wear oven mitts or use a reliable pot holder. In a saucepan, mix together the apple juice, star anise, and cinnamon sticks over medium heat and simmer gently for about 10 minutes to infuse the apple juice with the spices. Remove from the heat and let sit for 15 minutes. Discard the cinnamon sticks and star anise.

Add the sweet potato pulp and nutmeg to the pan and cook over low heat for 8 to 10 minutes, or until the mixture forms a smooth paste. Add a little more apple juice if the pulp seems dry.

In a bowl, sift together the flour, baking soda and salt. Whisk to ensure thorough mixing. Slowly stir in the sweet potato pulp mixture. In a small bowl, whisk together the honey, yogurt, goat cheese and egg. Add the oil and whisk again until smooth. Fold in the sweet potato mixture. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake for 60 to 70 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean.

Let the bread cool in the pan on a wire rack for about 5 minutes. Turn the loaf out of the pan and let cool completely on the rack.

SIDEBAR 1:

Discover: GRAPE SEED OIL

“I choose grape seed oil for many of my recipes. Unlike olive oil, it doesn’t thicken in the refrigerator and its flavor is more subtle. If you only have olive oil, or prefer it, the finished dish will still taste wonderful.”

Sidebar 2:

Discover: SPELT FLOUR

“A terrific source of fiber, spelt was first cultivated at least nine thousand years ago in the Fertile Crescent--today's Iraq. Italians call a similar grain farro, while Germans call it dinkel. Its nutrients, which include protein, riboflavin, niacin, iron and potassium, are easily absorbed by the body and are great immune boosters. While spelt contains some gluten, it's generally well tolerated by anyone who has trouble digesting wheat.”